

Article

“Change Direction”: Influencing the National Church through the Vatican during the Pinochet Dictatorship in Chile

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Abstract: The relations between the Chilean Church and the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990) are often characterized as conflictive. After a short period of accommodation and legitimation, the Chilean episcopate started to confront the dictatorship in the name of the poor and persecuted, but never breaking entirely with the regime. This led to a complicated relationship between the Church and the dictatorship, which tried to legitimize authoritarian rule by reference to Christian values and the defense of “Christian civilization”. Much historiography has examined this relation from the point of view of the Church. When examined from the point of view of the State important nuances appear. Documents from the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Relations and correspondence with the Chilean ambassador to the Vatican, shed new light on efforts by the Chilean state to shape relations with the Church and to change the position of bishops who were critical of the regime. These data help understand better the dynamics of conflict between Church and State in Chile during the dictatorship.

Keywords: Chile; Church; episcopate; Pinochet; dictatorship; Vatican; diplomacy

1. Introduction

In May 1983, the Vatican announced the names of three new bishops for the most important dioceses in Chile: Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción.¹ In his weekly secret report, the Chilean ambassador to the Vatican spoke about these appointments as follows: “We have been working closely on these matters for more than a year and a half, and we intensified our efforts over the past few months with the goal of achieving the best appointments possible. Meetings were held with almost all the voting Cardinals, with numerous officers of the Curia, as well as with others who might have some influence on these matters [...]. These nominations represent a clear improvement in the line followed up to now by the Holy See. The undersigned considers these to be a great triumph and with decisive influence for the political future of Chile”.² In another letter earlier the same year, the ambassador laid out his reasons: “The nominations reflect an effort to change direction, to correct a course of action that was excessively politicized—politicized in favor of the left—by the Chilean Church.”³

These citations demonstrate a fact that received little attention in the historiography of the relations between the Catholic Church and the dictatorship in Chile (1973–1990): the efforts by the government

¹ This article was prepared as part of the project ANID/FONDECYT/REGULAR/FOLIO N° 1200145.

² Letter from the Chilean embassy to the Holy See (ESS, *Embajada ante la Santa Sede*) to the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Chile (MREx, *Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores*): Informe semestral, secret, 1 August 1983, in: Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Relations of Chile (Amrech, *Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Chile*), Acta Santa Sede, 1983.

³ Letter ESS to MREx: Nominations of bishops, Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción, secret, 13 May 1983, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1983.

of Augusto Pinochet to influence the content of this relation through diplomatic negotiations with the Vatican. The relation between the Catholic Church and the Chilean dictatorship evolved in a complex and highly conflictive manner. After an early period of support and legitimation of the regime by the Catholic hierarchy, the majority of Chilean bishops came to constitute the most important moral opposition to the military government. This opposition arose out of the Church's work with victims of the dictatorship and expanded and consolidated in many ways, but never led to an open break in relations with the government. Neither the Church nor the Pinochet government, which justified the coup and all subsequent actions in Christian terms, had any interest in a complete break.

Much historiography has given detailed attention to accounting for how the Catholic Church transformed itself into a major opposition to the dictatorship while at the same time maintaining stable relations with government itself. This article returns to the issues, but now from the point of view of the state, a topic that has received much less attention. Understanding how the Pinochet government perceived the Church and following and paying close attention to state efforts to influence the attitude of the Church helps us explain more fully the conflictive relations between these two institutions during the dictatorship. In this way, this study contributes to analysis of the relations between the Church and the dictatorship, which is central to any effort to understand the impact and consequences of human rights violations in this period. To achieve this goal, the present study is based on correspondence between the Chilean embassy to the Holy See and the dictatorship's Ministry of Foreign Relations. This correspondence shows the position the Pinochet government took with the Vatican and its effort to influence the Chilean national Church through higher ecclesiastical channels. Until now, this material has not been considered in efforts to explain the conflicts between the Church and the dictatorship.⁴

To arrive at a full understanding of the relations between the authoritarian government and the Church, in what follows, I begin by reviewing the existing bibliography on the Chilean Church and its actions during the dictatorship in Chile. I then sketch out the opinions of several important actors in the Chilean Church concerning some of the most important events in this relation. This provides a foundation for a broader view of the situation in which we can situate the position of the Church and its reactions to approaches by the Chilean state to the Vatican. These approaches, and the general policy behind them, are then examined in light of the correspondence between the Chilean embassy to the Vatican and the Ministry of Foreign Relations. I close with conclusions that underscore the importance of taking both sides of the conflict into account as a basis for complete understanding of the attitude of the Church to the government, and of the government to the Church during the years of the Chilean dictatorship.

2. Historiographic Judgments about the Chilean Church and the Dictatorship

Overall, historiographers have noted an "ambiguous and cautious" reaction (Cancino Troncoso 1997, p. 24) by the Chilean Church to the coup and the installation of the dictatorship in Chile. In their early public statements and in private actions, Chile's bishops accorded legitimation to the military junta and accepted the new regime. There are several reasons for this position. Many authors note that following the coup, negative judgments about Marxism by some bishops led the episcopal conference to be content with the end of the Allende government and thankful to the military (Cancino Troncoso 1997; Smith 1982). These sentiments were encouraged by the perception that the military regime would be transitional, and that Chile would soon return to democracy, or as Smith puts it in his study of the Chilean Church, there was a "naive trust" in the military's promises (Smith 1982). There were also "pragmatic and tactical" reasons (Cancino Troncoso 1997, p. 29): the ecclesiastical hierarchy was clear that it had to accept the military junta as the only real power in the country, and in order to maintain the Church's position it was necessary to engage in dialogue with the new political authorities. The Church

⁴ One notable exception is the excellent work by Antje Schnoor on the changing position of the Jesuits in Chile. Schnoor uses some of this correspondence, (Schnoor 2019, pp. 427–35).

never made a complete break with the dictatorial government: this was a prerequisite for preserving some liberty of action and the ability to carry out its humanitarian programs in aid of victims through institutions like the Ecumenical Committee for Peace in Chile (*Comité Pro Paz*) and the Vicariate of Solidarity (*Vicaría de la Solidaridad*) (Timmermann 2017; Lowden 1996). This accords with the idea that many bishops, among them Cardinal Silva Henríquez, believed they could be more effective helping victims of the dictatorship through private actions. They did not engage in direct public denunciations of the violence which they considered to be ineffective (Schnoor 2019, p. 369).

Recent studies give more weight to a “civil society” within the Church (e.g., Levine 2015). They consider the Church not as a homogenous institution, but instead take into account many voices and actors within the Church itself. In this way, Antje Schnoor explains that Chile’s Jesuits, through their publication *Mensaje* did not deny legitimacy to the coup because they believed that the Allende government had been unable to maintain public order. At the same time, however, they insisted on a return to democracy, and found themselves subject to regime censors who labeled them as progressive clergy. Although the bishops got direct support from the Jesuits (Schnoor 2019), at the same time they were a target of criticism from conservative Catholics like the Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP, *Tradición, Familia y Propiedad*) or the Military Chaplains. They strongly legitimated the dictatorship and criticized the bishops for what they called a “weak” attitude towards Marxists (Ruderer 2012; Ruderer 2015). This mix of support and criticism from within the Church must be taken into account in order to understand the ambiguous reaction of the hierarchy to the regime. In the same way, there were critical voices raised from the “Church of the poor”, which reproached the bishops for their own authoritarianism, given that on the one hand they supported and helped victims but on the other they never criticized the authoritarian structures of the dictatorial government (Férrández 1996).

In the historiography of this period, there is an almost unanimous judgment that the ambiguous public stance of the bishops was accompanied by an immediate humanitarian reaction in which the Church mobilized wide range of resources in support of victims: publicizing cases, providing food, shelter, and legal assistance, and naming and locating those detained who often simply disappeared (Hensel and Ruderer 2011). This work was carried out in the early years by the Peace Committee and after 1976 through the Vicariate of Solidarity (Lowden 1993, 1996; Wilde 2015; Kelly 2015; Ruderer and Strassner 2015; Del Villar Tagle 2018). Thanks to the work of these institutions, the bishops became more and more aware of the scale of the violations of human rights, leading to a clear shift of position between 1974 and 1976. Beginning at the latest in 1976, the Chilean Church became the only institution opposed to the regime capable of open criticizing the repression. This shift can be explained on the one hand by the bishops’ growing awareness of human rights violations and their understanding that the regime was not planning to leave power in the short term (if ever), and on the other hand by pressure from progressive elements within the Church which predate the coup. The evolution of these progressive elements is part of a long-term process of change within the Chilean Church which brought it closer to the world of the poor (Botto 2018). Others (Gill 1998) argue that these new positions represented a reaction to the growth of evangelical Protestantism among the poor, to the influence of certain progressive figures in the Church like Father Alberto Hurtado or Bishop Manuel Larraín (Larios Mengotti 2017), or are due to the application to Chilean realities of the changes stemming from the Second Vatican Council, a process guided by the Chilean hierarchy itself (Férrández Labbé 2019). Together, these processes helped the Chilean Church transform itself into one of the most progressive in the continent, which made it impossible for the bishops to remain silent in the face of the abuses and violations of the dictatorship.⁵

⁵ This attitude contrasted with the stance taken by the Argentinean Episcopate, which, with few exceptions (Catoggio 2016), backed the military dictatorship in 1976 and even delivered religious legitimization for the violent repression of Argentine citizens (Mignone 2006; Obregón 2005; di Stefano and Zanatta 2009; Ruderer 2010). The Brazilian Church took a more engaged attitude against the dictatorship (1964–1985), but, due to divisions in the hierarchy and the goal of

It is interesting to see, that only one of the first studies of the Church during the dictatorship emphasizes that the Church began to change its position only when it came under direct attack by the Government (Smith 1982, p. 331). According to Smith the turning point came after mid-1976 when the regime organized an attack on a group of “progressive” bishops and shortly thereafter expelled lawyers associated with the Christian Democratic Party (itself close to the bishops). The hierarchy abandons its hitherto ambiguous and cautious stance and develops a much more critical position, one that remained in place until 1983 when the changes in the episcopate noted at the outset of this article began to make themselves felt. This idea, that the turn to critical position by the Church was due, among other factors, to the hostile actions of the dictatorship, has not been prominent in current historiography. We will examine this further here.

Another factor that has received scant attention is the role of the Church during the 1980s. Many studies note a clear change of position with the appointment of a new Archbishop for the capital city, Santiago, when Cardinal Silva Henríquez retired due to age, and was replaced by Cardinal Francisco Fresno, who was one of the bishops who had publicly applauded the 1973 military coup. With Cardinal Fresno, the Church assumed a more conciliatory position, reaching out to the regime and positioning itself as a mediator between the government and the opposition (Meacham 1987; Cancino Troncoso 1997; Fleet and Smith 1997; Strassner 2006). This stance allowed the Church to play an important role articulating the views of the emerging political opposition while retaining its own freedom of action with a view to a possible political transition to democracy. At the same time, it is important to note that these changes in ecclesiastical personnel and the emergence of a more conciliatory attitude to the regime did not make for any essential change in work on human rights. In this area the Church continued to develop its humanitarian work confronting the dictatorship over its violations of human rights, but now mixing denunciations with calls for a return to democracy. In this sense, the Church continued to play an active political role: insisting on the return to democracy provided a political alternative that complicated its relations with the government of Pinochet (Strassner 2006). The changes and continuities in the stance of the Church after 1983 have yet to be examined adequately from the point of view of the State, that is, as a reaction to the policies and specific actions of the Chilean state. Before getting into detail on how the dictatorial government viewed the Church, it is important to lay out the most important events and the judgments these government actions provoked in important Church members.

3. The Chilean Church under the Dictatorship

As mentioned before, the early reaction of the Church to the dictatorship can be characterized as one of cautious legitimization.⁶ Along with this legitimization there was an almost immediate (October 1973) commitment to humanitarian work with the establishment of the peace committee (Comité Pro Paz) due mostly to the initiative of Lutheran bishop Helmut Frenz (Frenz 2006; Lowden 1993). This work with and for the victims of human rights violations would become the principal source of conflict between the Church and the dictatorship. Thus, in its first major public declaration (April 1974), a pastoral letter on “Reconciliation in Chile”, the bishops still expressed gratitude for the coup but for

negotiating with the military, never was able to establish an institution similar to the Vicariate of Solidarity (Serbin 2000; Kelly 2015). In the Uruguayan case, too, the Church never could play an important role in the opposition to military rule (Ruderer and Strassner forthcoming). So, despite its ambiguous first reaction, and due to the foundation of the Vicariate of Solidarity, the actions of the Chilean Church confronting the military dictatorship stand out in the overall context of Latin America.

⁶ In this section I will lay out some important events in the church-dictatorship relation, using the impressions of the protagonists themselves, above all Memoirs of Cardinal Silva Henríquez and the Auxiliary Bishop of Santiago, Jorge Hourton, to gauge in this way the main reactions of the church in the face of the actions of the dictatorship. I am conscient that the impressions of both bishops don't represent the opinion of the church as whole, but, mostly due to the predominant position of Cardenal Silva Henríquez as archbishop of Santiago, I will use, in the following section, his point of view as representative for the Chilean church, having in mind that there has been other voices, for example, the much more conservative one from archbishop Tagle in Valparaíso.

the first time they also publicly criticized the regime's own violence. These criticisms were enough to spur strong attacks from the press friendly to the regime, attacks that were reinforced by conflicts within the Church, as two bishops, Msgr. Tagle and Msgr. Fresno, publicly voiced their dissent from the criticisms expressed in the pastoral letter (Smith 1982, p. 296). The visible lack of unity among the bishops became an important factor in the dictatorial government's efforts to delegitimize Church critiques of its repressive policies. Attacks on the Church by elements in the press and persons close to the regime escalated and grew sharper in tone in 1975 following the publication of a second pastoral letter which once again mixed positive judgments on the regime with criticisms of its violations of human rights. At the end of that same year there were several incidents that made for a visible deterioration in relations between the Church and the regime. A newspaper close to the regime took statements by Bishop Carlos Camus (given in an off the record interview) out of context making them look like severe criticisms of the military. This was a clear effort to discredit the Church in the eyes of public opinion (Smith 1982, p. 301). In October 1975, the regime denied entry to the country to Helmut Frenz, in an effort to silence one of the most prominent voices critical of its repressive policies (Frenz 2006). Shortly thereafter, the government arrested several priests and collaborators associated with the Peace Committee, because they had attended to wounded members of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR, *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*) who had sought shelter from the regime's secret police DINA (*Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional*). This incident provoked a sharp public discussion between Cardinal Silva Henríquez (who did not defend the militants but insisted on the duty of helping the wounded whoever they were), and the regime's chief ideologue, Jaime Guzmán, who strongly attacked the Cardinal. The incident also led to demands by Pinochet to disband the Peace Committee. The Cardinal acceded to this demand but proceeded to establish the Vicariate of Solidarity, under the direct supervision of the Church and hence with a measure of protection (Lowden 1993; Ruderer and Strassner forthcoming). All these attacks led Cardinal Silva to the conclusion that "the hostility of the government had given way now to a climate of open warfare" (Cavallo 1991, p. 83). The hierarchy clearly believed that attacks by the government were responsible for the deterioration of relations. This "open warfare" came to a peak in 1976 when the regime did not just expel lawyers associated with the Christian Democrats but above all when it launched direct attacks through the DINA on three Chilean bishops who had attended a meeting in Riobamba (Ecuador), where they were arrested by the military government for supposed political activities. On their return to Chile, they were assaulted in the airport by civilian agents of the DINA. This led to a sharp reaction by the Permanent Committee of the Episcopacy which threatened the aggressors with excommunication (Hourton 2009, p. 251). Earlier the same year, in the words of Bishop Jorge Hourton, "there were strong attacks on the Church and on its bishops by the so called Fiducia" (Hourton 2009, p. 250). This is a reference to the publication of a book by the ultra-conservative Catholic group TFP (*Tradición, Familia y Propiedad*) better known in Chile as Fiducia, which strongly attacked Cardinal Silva Henríquez himself (Ruderer 2012). The Church explicitly linked these attacks, along with the assault at the airport, to an official government policy, given that neither the publication nor the attacks would have been possible without the official sanction. In the opinion of the Church, these attacks simply "throw more fuel on a fire which has been created by previous incidents" (Cavallo 1991, p. 100).

In succeeding years, that fire never went out, and relations remained tense but with no effort by the Church to make a public break with the dictatorship. Although the hierarchy began to accept the fact that the regime was likely to remain in place for some time to come, the bishops never abandoned their commitment to work for human rights. As a result, the topics of human rights and the fate of the detained and disappeared became the core issues of conflict between the Church and the dictatorship. The memoir of bishop Jorge Hourton and Cardinal Silva Henríquez show very clearly how government attacks on priests, sisters and lay people committed to human rights continued and how these worsened relations over time (Hourton 2009, p. 266). The discovery of the bodies of regime victims in the ovens of Lonquén in 1978 was still another moment in which the Church came face to face with the regime's silence and indifference concerning its victims. The judgment of Cardinal Silva

clearly affirms that violence and abuse were central to the Church's relations with the government. He saw the regime's silence in the face of the issue of the detained and disappeared as "its most serious mistake" (Cavallo 1991, p. 123).

Nonetheless, the proclamation of the Constitution of 1980 lent a certain legitimacy to the dictatorship and relations calmed down a bit. The Cardinal was convinced that the task of the Church was neither to "overthrow nor to sustain governments" (Cavallo 1991, p. 114). For this reason, he offered a *Te Deum* mass in the Cathedral to celebrate the new constitution. This gesture to the military brought much criticism from more progressive sectors of the Church but also showed that the hierarchy recognized the facts on the ground, that is, the political power of the military regime and its own desire to maintain stable relations with the political authorities (Cavallo 1991, p. 213). At this point, and in his own words (Cavallo 1991, p. 220) to maintain an equilibrium within the Church and to calm progressive critics, Cardinal Silva gave an interview to the Italian press, in which shortly after the *Te Deum* for the Constitution, he strongly criticized the dictatorship for its violations of human rights and for being a totalitarian regime. This interview led to renewed attacks on the Church in the press. The result was that relations remained very tense until mid-1983 when the changes in the episcopacy noted earlier took effect (Hourton 2009, p. 310; Cavallo 1991, p. 217).

To understand the relation between these institutions in the 1980s, we need to take account of the agency of the state as well. In his memoirs, the Cardinal is explicit that the regime sought to "limit the bishops within a certain model of contact and hold them to a highly disciplined exchange" (Cavallo 1991, p. 228). This is confirmed by Pinochet's orders, which, in 1980 changed the intermediary between the Church and the government, replacing General Court, who had gained the respect of the bishops, first for General Guillard and later for a catholic civilian, Sergio Rillón. These personnel changes were first received well by the bishops for what they saw as Rillón's closeness to the Church, but in the end only served to worsen relations. The hierarchy soon realized that Rillón had neither the interest nor the orders required to fulfill the role of intermediary. His goal, rather, was to push for a reconstitution of the hierarchy in the hope of influencing Vatican views of the Chilean Episcopate (Cavallo 1991, p. 229). For the Church, it remained very clear that they "did not share a common language with the government" (Cavallo 1991, p. 228).

This situation of limited and distorted communication persisted until the new episcopal appointments mentioned at the outset. The new Archbishop of Santiago Msgr. Francisco Fresno was considered an ally by the government which anticipated an improvement in relations with his accession to the post. This view is confirmed by the reaction of one bishop highly committed to human rights when he heard the news: "I just heard of the naming of Msgr. Francisco Fresno. PLOP!! This is not what we hoped for (Hourton 2009, p. 353)". In effect, with a new archbishop of Santiago in place, the Church adopted a more conciliatory position with the government, manifest in several attempts by the Archbishop to mediate political accords between the opposition and the government, among them the National Accord which helped draw together the various political positions within the opposition (Meacham 1987; Strassner 2006). Once again, however, the theme of human rights violations and the violence of the regime upset efforts to improve the relations between the Church and the government. At the beginning of 1984, a serious incident arose between the Church and the dictatorial government when four *miristas* [members of the movement of the Revolutionary Left or MIR] fled to the Vatican embassy in Chile and requested political asylum. The papal nuncio, who belonged to the more conservative sector of the Church, refused pressure from the government to hand over the *miristas*, citing diplomatic immunity. This incident notably worsened relations between the two institutions (Wilde 2015, p. 192). A further incident came with the death of Father André Jarlan in mid-1984. Father Jarlan was killed by bullets fired by a *carabinero* [member of the national Police of Chile] during a protest in the township of La Victoria while he was reading the Bible. These cases, added to the general intensification of repression during nationwide protests between 1983 and 1986 led the Church, now under the leadership of Cardinal Fresno, to take up again its role of critic and defender of human rights. If the military believed its problems with the Church would

disappear with a more conservative leader like Fresno, they were clearly mistaken. Violations of human rights remained the central issue for conflicts between the Church and the dictatorship and relations remained tense, interrupted only by the visit of Pope John Paul II to Chile in April 1987 (Navasal Kunstmann 2017). That visit raised hopes within the Church for a broad “democratizing impact”, and as we shall see, fear in the government of precisely that possibility.

In general, it is clear that for the Church, the central issue in its relations with the government were violations of human rights and the multiple attacks on Church institutions, groups, and people as a result of their active defense of victims. Its stance throughout the dictatorship cannot be understood without taking into account these attacks and the government’s efforts to paint the Church as an enemy. The fact that the regime perceived it as an enemy never made sense to the hierarchy and they never accepted this status. This shaped their conduct throughout the dictatorship. In the words of Cardinal Silva Henríquez: “The Church cannot refrain from denouncing abuses of human dignity, [. . .] seeing this as the actions of an enemy or opponent is as wrong as seeing this as the acts of an ally who can be used” (Cavallo 1991, p. 114).

4. Gaining Influence within the Church: The Dictatorship and the Vatican

Two points are central to any effort to understand the stance taken by the Pinochet dictatorship to the Catholic Church. Of basic importance is the military’s perception of communism and its relation with Christianity. For insight into the views of the generals I base myself on a series of conferences about Marxism given by the Opus Dei priest José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois,⁷ to the military junta on the personal invitation of Pinochet himself. Ibáñez Langlois explained to the generals that Marxism is “a religion in reverse with hatred raised to a mystical level”⁸ and for this reason, “Christians tempted by Marxism or infiltrated by Leninism, for example in theologies of liberation, are today one of the most tragic phenomena in the Catholic world”.⁹ To the military authorities and their allies, it was clear that any and all Catholics close to the theology of liberation were simply “useful allies”¹⁰ of Marxism and therefore automatically classified as enemies of a government that claimed to be inspired by Christian values. This interpretation was addressed by priests close to liberation theology like the Jesuit José Aldunate, a strong opponent of the dictatorship, who stated in his clandestine publication *Policarpo*, that “[Ibáñez Langlois] has tried to strengthen the regime in its conviction that those Christians, every more numerous, inspired by the theology of liberation, are enemies infiltrated by Marxism”.¹¹ The Chilean regime believed that there were numerous priests and bishops in effect closer to Marxism than to their own Catholic faith and therefore felt free to denounce them to the Vatican.

This understanding brings me to the second point which led the Church to denounce a so called *Banzer Plan* to combat progressive forces in the Church.¹² This plan, according to the clandestine catholic journal *Policarpo*, envisioned three basic tactics: “take advantage of existing divisions within the Church, [. . .] slander and persecute progressive leaders, [. . .] intimidate foreign priests and sisters and expel them from the country into exile.”¹³ The central point for our purposes is not so much if the

⁷ Ibáñez Langlois was one of the priests most visible in official media, praising the government in his radio and television programs.

⁸ Ibáñez Langlois: Marxismos. Religión al revés. Síntesis de las ocho conferencias desarrollados por el sacerdote José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois ante las autoridades de gobierno, in: Archivo CIDOC (Centro de Investigación y Documentación, Universidad Finis Terrae, Santiago) (copy donated to the archive by General Patricio Arancibia Clavel, p. 13).

⁹ See (Ibid., p. 14).

¹⁰ See (Ibid., p. 14).

¹¹ *Policarpo*, Año 1, Nr. 2 (ago. 1981, p. 9).

¹² The *Banzer Plan* (named for Hugo Banzer, a military President of Bolivia) was, according to church sources cited here, an agreement among military dictatorships in the Southern Cone of Latin America to discredit liberation theology and stifle progressive forces in the Church. During research for this article, we could not find government or military sources to prove the existence of the *Banzer Plan*, but, for the purpose of our topic, it is not necessary neither. What matters here, is the perception of the church that this plan indeed existed.

¹³ *Policarpo*, Año 1, Nr. 5 (nov. 1981, p. 10).

Plan really existed but rather the extent to which the Chilean Church perceived its consequences and felt itself to be under attack. Cardinal Silva Henríquez underscored its significance for Church-State relations as follows: “I cannot say if the ‘Bañer Plan’ really existed or not. But there can be no doubt that its recommendations fit closely with the positions that some in the Chilean government have taken towards us” (Cavallo 1991, pp. 205–6). In effect, as we shall see, the stances assumed by the Pinochet dictatorship fit very closely with what was outlined by F. Aldunate in *Policarpo* (divide, slander, force into exile) and had a significant impact on the how the Church understood its relations with the government. For these reasons, it is important to take a closer look.

The correspondence between Héctor Riesle, the regime’s ambassador to the Vatican and the Ministry of Foreign Relations provides valuable insights. Riesle belonged to the ultra-conservative Tradition, Family and Property movement and was also a member of the Conservative Party. He was prominent among those political figures who defended the regime on religious grounds (Ruderer 2012).¹⁴ On assuming his position as ambassador in April 1974, Riesle realized right away that the Vatican “had a critical view”¹⁵ of the new regime. He thus took it as his explicit task to “refute the falsehood that have reached the Vatican concerning the actions of the Government of Chile, [a task] which must be accompanied by sustained efforts to calm spirits and to smooth the rough edges in a context shaped by a distorted vision of our realities”.¹⁶ On the same occasion, the Minister of Foreign Relations, Vice Admiral Ismael Huerta, emphasized “the extraordinary importance that the Supreme Government accords to its diplomatic efforts with the Vatican”.¹⁷ Securing favorable opinions from the Vatican was of great importance to the Pinochet government, given that a central pillar of its legitimization rested on a religious discourse of the defense of Christian values (Ruderer 2010). To achieve this goal, the regime needed to be able to identify influential figures within the Vatican.¹⁸ A sustained effort was also made to advance a theory about the proper separation of temporal and religious spheres of action: “As a result, the Government of Chile has no desire to intervene in the internal affairs of the Church [. . .]. At the same time, our position requires us to insist that the Church itself respect these limits and refrain from intervening in the temporal actions of the Government”.¹⁹

Of course, the most important obstacle to achieving any real separation of these spheres was the government’s own systematic violation of human rights which, as we have seen, made it impossible for the Church to remain silent about the “temporal actions of the Government”. Within the embassy to the Vatican there was great awareness of this situation. This is clear in Riesle’s efforts to explain to the government that a central issue in relations with the Vatican was the doctrine of national security [foundational for the regime] which the Church considered to be a “logical antecedent to violations of human rights and authoritarian tendencies”.²⁰ In the same way Riesle emphasized that “what can still be considered to be the most difficult point of all, is the problem of the detained and disappeared”.²¹ The violent repression had clearly become the central problem in relations between the Church and the dictatorship. Both institutions were aware of the problem, but since the government could not and would not alter its policies, it had to have recourse to other arguments.

¹⁴ Writing shortly after the coup, Riesle cited Thomas Aquinas on the right of rebellion against tyranny as a justification for the actions of the military (Riesle Contreras 1973).

¹⁵ Letter Embassy to the Holy See (ESS) to the Ministry of Foreign Relations (MREx): Presentation of Credentials, confidential, 12 April 1974, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1974.

¹⁶ Letter from MREx (Vice Admiral Huerta) to ESS: Dirección de Asuntos internacionales, confidential, 6 May 1974, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1974.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Letter from MREx (Vice Admiral Huerta) to the ESS: Dirección de Asuntos internacionales, confidential, 8 April 1974, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1974.

²⁰ Letter ESS to MREx: “Actitud de la Iglesia frente a la doctrina de Seguridad Nacional”, secret, 10 June 1976, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1976.

²¹ Letter ESS to MREx: “Se refiere situación desaparecidos”, secret, 18 October 1977, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1977.

One important element in the government's strategy was to paint human rights denunciations by the Church as part of a campaign by international communism to discredit the Chilean military. Central to this argument was the military's understanding, noted earlier, of the relations between communism and Christianity, according to which progressive Christians were the objects of infiltration by communists who hoped to use the Church in psychological warfare and media attacks being waged by international communism against the government of Chile. According to Riesle, this tactic required "erasing the proper image of utter incompatibility between Christianity and Marxism, for what it needs a group that had already been infiltrated".²² In the same way, international communism exercised "pressure within the country to make it difficult for the Church and for many Catholics to take up clearly anticommunist positions and, in this way, to commit themselves to the 'revolutionary process'".²³ In these ways, the Chilean government tried to present to the Vatican the idea that all the denunciations and criticisms directed at the dictatorship owed more to the effort of international communism than to the true opinions of the Church. Chile was depicted as a valiant "David" struggling against the "Goliath" of the Soviet Union which had managed to infiltrate the Chilean Church.²⁴

Now, given the "personal ideological position of the Pope and his group",²⁵ who Riesle in 1976 saw as still close to the Christian Democrats, arguments about communist infiltration did not seem sufficient to change relations with the Vatican in any major way given the importance that issues of human rights had acquired in the early years of the regime. For this reason, in September 1976 Riesle writing about "the most conflictive points in relations with the Church" makes specific mention of "everything related to arbitrary arrests and mistreatments, [. . .] the state of siege and the Doctrine of National Security."²⁶ The issue of state violence remained at the heart of the problems between the Church and the government of Chile.

To counter the negative image the regime had in the eyes of the Vatican, the Government used a tactic that fits perfectly with the recommendation of the *Banzer Plan*, noted earlier. The tactic was to take advantage of divisions among Chilean bishops as a pretext for raising doubts about some with the Pope. Thus, on several occasions, Riesle transmitted the "sense of surprise and unease the government experienced about the activities of the Cardinal Archbishop of Santiago, Msgr. Raúl Silva Henríquez",²⁷ about whom Riesle left no doubt that "his statements [. . .] reveal a position that is highly antagonistic to the Supreme Government, politically and above all with reference to economics".²⁸ The Cardinal thus became the prime target of the government, which also accounts for attacks against him in the Chilean press, which aimed to undermine his standing not only in the public opinion within Chile but also within key circles at the Vatican. As we have seen, these attacks backfired, which only made the government even more irritated with the Cardinal.

Along with the Cardinal, a group of Chilean bishops were identified, who, in the eyes of the government, were responsible for the bad image of the dictatorship and for the conflicts between Church and State. Thus, Riesle noted not only that "on the part of a group of bishops there was a desire to seek conflicts with the Government". He went further to identify "the bishops most opposed to the government as González Cruchaga, Camus, Ariztía, Hourton y Alvear, [a group that] is waging a

²² Letter ESS a MREx: entrevista con monseñor Agostino Casaroli, 22 March 1974, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1974.

²³ Letter ESS a MREx: Remite estudio, 17 June 1977, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1977. This letter contained a detailed analysis of the strategies of international communism and was received with great approval by the Ministry: a handwritten note shows the importance the regime gave to this argument. Thus: "Congratulations. We look forward to its publication".

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Letter ESS to MREx: Situación relaciones entre Santa Sede y Chile, secret, 22 September 1976, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1976.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Letter ESS to MREx: Acto litúrgico en Catedral, secret, 9 June 1976, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1976.

²⁸ Letter ESS to MREx: Declaraciones del cardenal, 12 August 1977, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1977.

mounting campaign of confrontation with the Government.”²⁹ This effort to depict some bishops as instigators of conflict responded to the idea of convincing the Vatican that not all bishops opposed the regime, and that the government was not in any case responsible for the conflict. The problem was, rather, that some bishops were exceeding their proper role. To be sure, the bishops identified as “opposition” were of course those most outspoken about official violence and abuse. In this way, the regime sought to plant suspicions in the Vatican about those in the Chilean Church who were fighting for human rights.

One clear indication that this was the tactic comes from a report, signed personally by Manuel Contreras (the director of the DINA), that the government transmitted to the ambassador. This report concerned Msgr. Cristián Precht, head of the Vicariate of Solidarity, and accused Msgr. Precht of carrying out numerous “activities against the Supreme Government”. The Vicariate was depicted as an institution that “is overstepping the bounds of its legitimate spiritual functions developing campaigns in opposition to the Supreme Government.”³⁰ In the same tone, in his annual report for 1979, Riesle insisted that he regularly brings to the attention of the Vatican “the negative consequences that the activities of the Vicariate have for the Church itself, for peace and for rebuilding the nation, for Catholics, and for relations between the Church and the government.”³¹

Although in the same embassy reports it is evident that these accusations do not always have much influence with Vatican personnel,³² at the same time it is clear, as we shall see in the following, that the tactic of dividing the bishops and accusing those closest to the defense of human rights of being the catalyst for the problems between Church and State, had some long term benefits for the regime, which was able to use these arguments when preparing its position in negotiations over future episcopal appointments. These appointments, above all those which came into effect in 1983 with the retirements due to age in the dioceses of Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción as well as in the Military Vicariate, became central to the regime’s strategy for dealing with the Vatican. Writing in September 1980, Riesle warned the government that “nominations of new pastors for the most populous dioceses and for the bishop of the Armed Forces are of such importance that they could not be viewed passively by the Government of Chile. These four appointments will be absolutely decisive for the future direction and actions of the Chilean Church during the next twenty years”.³³ In the same letter, as part of his search for greater influence, the ambassador proposed the possibility of arriving at a “*modus vivendi* with the Holy See [. . .] that would include a procedure for regular consultation over the nomination of future bishops”.³⁴ Conscious of the fact that it would not be easy to convince the Vatican to sign such an agreement with a dictatorial regime, the ambassador laid out several arguments that the government of Chile could use, among these the making it possible to deduct contributions to the Church from national taxes, given that the Chilean Church “is very poor”.³⁵

²⁹ Letter ESS to MREx: Entrevista con sustituto Secretaria de Estado, 23 September 1976 in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1976. A written note on the document shows that the letter was brought to the personal attention of Pinochet, which demonstrates the extent of coordination within the government concerning relations with the Vatican.

³⁰ Both citations in Letter from MREx to ESS: Remite antecedentes del presbítero Cristian Precht, 15 July 1977, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1977.

³¹ Letter ESS to MREx: Remite “Memoria Anual”, confidential, 27 November 1979, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1979. The coincidences with the Banzer Plan are not limited to accusations against progressive Catholics and the exploitation of division among the bishops, but also include the expulsion of progressive foreign priests, who, according to the Ministry “are carrying out activities with clear political implications”. Letter MREx to ESS: Información semanal, secret, 4 September 1981, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1981.

³² The Vatican always maintains multiple channels of information, including *ad-liminam* visits used by bishops to highlight the state of things in their dioceses. These provided those accused with a means of transmitting their own version of events to Vatican personnel.

³³ Letter ESS to MREx: Problema sucesión episcopal, secret, 3 September 1980, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1980.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. The letter also mentions Catholic universities, a complex theme we cannot go into here above all for reasons of space. The juridical status of the church was also raised, because, according to Riesle, the new Constitution left a space in which to put pressure on the church in “extreme cases”, Ibid. In all likelihood the possibility of a *modus vivendi* is what brought Sergio Rillón to Rome in 1984 to propose “a bilateral formula [. . .] that would be similar to the old Patronage” as Cardinal Silva

The fact that the government was planning well in advance about these nominations underscores the importance they held for the regime. Despite the multiple arguments proposed by Riesle for these negotiations, the central point for the government continued to highlight the divisions within the Chilean Episcopal Conference, accusing some bishops of undue politicization. This strategy was reinforced in 1979 with the accession of Pope John Paul II, a much more conservative pontiff who promised to be attentive to the “problem” posed by bishops who had close relations with socialism or communism.

For this reason, in mid-1980 Riesle underlined the divisions within the Chilean episcopate and claimed that he had made it clear to the new Vatican authorities that “some bishops had clearly taken a socialist, even fully Marxist option [...], for this reason, I pointed out the need for decisive action by the Holy See to moderate the Chilean episcopacy [...] with direct reference to the nomination of future bishops.”³⁶ In the same line, he mentioned, some months before, that “concrete actions were needed on the part of the Holy See that will demonstrate a different orientation from the pro socialist sector of the episcopacy, for example with nominations in a much more centrist and pastoral line.”³⁷

In the coming years, the regime used this combination of long-range planning and emphasis on divisions within the Chilean hierarchy by forwarding each critical commentary on the Chilean Church to Vatican officials. For example, following on an Pastoral letter critical of the 1980 plebiscite for the new Constitution, Riesle explained to the Vatican that “the bishops have transformed themselves [...] into an opposition political force of a pro socialist orientation and that this needed to be corrected.”³⁸ One year later, the ambassador warned that “any episcopal nomination in the line of the so called ‘theology of liberation’ or something similar would not contribute to the unity of Chilean Catholics, nor would it facilitate relations between the Church and the State which the Government wishes to improve.”³⁹ Another year later, the government used an incident between Bishop Hourton and the regime, in which Hourton sided with students on strike. The government accused Hourton of provoking violence and Riesle wrote to the Ministry, stating: “This event gives the undersigned a perfect opportunity to insist [...] that situations of this kind are not the fault of the government, which, much to the contrary, for more than nine years now has shown an extraordinary patience, a fact that has been recognized and appreciated by the Holy See. We are now coming to a point where the Church itself needs to do something to prevent attitudes of this kind, a call to attention.”⁴⁰ In the same vein the government linked the 1982 Pastoral Letter “The Rebirth of Chile” (*El Renacer de Chile*), in which the bishops criticized the economic situation in the country and called for democratization, with the issue of new episcopal appointments. The bishops’ criticisms were presented not as an understandable reflection on the state of the country, but rather as an improper intrusion by the Church into the political sphere: “Given the weight within the Church of the now vacant sees of Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción, an episcopal position like the one visible in this letter only worsens the political problems of the country, which entails grave damage to the Church itself.”⁴¹ Dealing now with a more conservative Vatican led by Pope John Paul II, the Chilean dictatorship advanced arguments about the unity of the Church and the politicization of the hierarchy to make the case that the government was not responsible for the deterioration of Church-State relations. This was the fault of “philo-socialist bishops”, a situation that needed to be changed in the future.

It is important to mention, that this interpretation did not always get a favorable reception in the Vatican, which had many more sources among the bishops and the Nuncio. In any case, Riesle

noted with a certain irony for the limited possibilities of success (Cavallo 1991, p. 229). In the end, none of these ideas was realized (Schnoor 2019, p. 430).

³⁶ Letter ESS to MREx: Entrevista con Monseñor S.E.R. Achille Silvestrini, 18 July 1980, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1980.

³⁷ Letter ESS to MREx: Conversación del suscrito ... , reservado, 8 November 1979, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1979.

³⁸ Letter ESS to MREx: Informa conversación con ... , secreto, 26 September 1980, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1980.

³⁹ Letter ESS to MREx: Conversaciones sostenidas ... , secret, 7 October 1981, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1981.

⁴⁰ Letter ESS to MREx: Informe mensual, reservado, 3 October 1982, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1982.

⁴¹ Telex MREx to ESS: Nr. 034, December 1982, en: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1982.

was a person who enjoyed exaggerating his role in events (Schnoor 2019, p. 428). Bearing this in mind, what I suggest is not that the dictatorial government could determine the names of future bishops, but rather that we can see clearly how and with what arguments they tried to influence not only the naming of new bishops, but also the general tone and public stance of the Chilean Episcopal Conference. This is the case not only with respect to bishops nominated but also to those priests who in the end were not considered by the Holy See. Riesle's persistent criticism of the Auxiliary Bishop of Santiago, Jorge Hourton, and of Jesuits close to the theology of liberation like Fernando Montes clearly influenced the fact that they were never nominated to be diocesan bishops.⁴² At the end of his term as ambassador, Riesle judges himself to have had a major triumph by averting the nomination of Msgr. Cristián Precht, first head of the Variate of Solidarity. He writes, "it is very clear that the fact that he is not a bishop is due in large measure to the work of this embassy."⁴³

As I noted at the outset, the eventual nominations in 1983 of new bishops for Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción, and above all the naming of Msgr. Fresno for the capital city, were also considered to be a significant triumph by the embassy.⁴⁴ The Chilean government publicly shared this judgment in a September 1983 statement which praised the incoming Archbishop given that "the fundamental work of Msgr. Fresno in recent years has won him the admiration and support of the great majority of Chileans."⁴⁵

The view of the government was, that it had managed to influence the shape and outlook of the Chilean episcopacy through its work with the Vatican, in this way changing the direction of a national Church that had been perceived as a clear political enemy. The dictatorship had successfully used the channels of the global hierarchy to influence the national Church whose actions could not be repressed as directly as those of the political opposition without losing religious legitimacy.

It is, however, also clear that working with the higher levels of the Vatican required negotiation and hence compromise of a kind the dictatorship was not accustomed to at home. This is why, with the passage of time, both the government and the Chilean embassy to the Vatican became aware that their great "triumph", Cardinal Fresno, was not in fact disposed to change the Church's position on human rights which made for continuing tension in relations with the state. At first, the ambassador explained Fresno's stance as owing to the "circle in which he found himself",⁴⁶ thus throwing the weight of responsibility on others (priests and bishops) who were influencing his hostile attitudes to the government. However, in the coming years, as Fresno developed a conciliatory and mediating role in the country, he himself became a target of criticism. Riesle considered his idea of a National Accord to be little more than a "subtle and apparently moderate position and therefore all the more dangerous",⁴⁷ because all these actions by the Church had as their end goal democratization, and therefore the end of the dictatorship.⁴⁸

By the mid-1980s it became more difficult for the government to find interlocutors in the Vatican as willing to listen to its proposals as was the case at the beginning of the reign of John Paul II. The Vatican's conviction that democracy was the best political system for all the world, based on its politics towards the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe, was also applied to Chile. Riesle was well

⁴² Jorge Hourton reveals his strong disappointment about not being nominated, which in his autobiography he does not link directly to Riesle's influence (Hourton 2009, p. 362). But the letters cited here affirm the extent of Ambassador Riesle's efforts. For the case of the Jesuit Fernando Montes, see (Schnoor 2019, p. 431).

⁴³ Letter ESS to MREx: *Apreciación . . .*, reservado, 8 January 1987, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1987.

⁴⁴ For a similar interpretation taking into account the role of Riesle, see (Schnoor 2019, pp. 427–35).

⁴⁵ Letter MREx to ESS: *Remite informaciones periódicas*, 15 September 1983, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1983.

⁴⁶ Letter ESS to MREx: *Entrevista con . . .*, 1 December 1983, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1983.

⁴⁷ Letter ESS to MREx: *Remitir apreciación mensual*, secret, 12 December 1985, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1985.

⁴⁸ Along the same lines, Riesle also strongly criticized the Nuncio in Chile, when the Nuncio defended the four wounded *miristas*, who had sought sanctuary in the Vatican embassy in January 1984 after an encounter with security forces. Because the regime feared a church that might favor an end to the dictatorship, they turned even conservative figures like the Nuncio or Fresno into enemies in so far as they denounced official repressive policies. Letter ESS to MREx: *Informe semestral*, secret, 2 July 1984, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1984.

aware of this more critical situation, and wrote the following illustration of the relations between the government of Chile and the Vatican: “Relations between the Government and the Holy See are complex and difficult, because by direct and indirect means both the Vatican and the national Church hope to install a more ‘democratic and Christian government’ in our country. For its part, the national government is working to neutralize these by appealing to the Holy See to intervene with certain Church people in Chile and get them to cease their destabilizing activities. Also, that appointments of future bishops go to those who will concentrate on strictly pastoral issues.”⁴⁹

Within this climate of mutual expectations, mostly unfulfilled for both sides, the visit by Pope John Paul II in April 1987 marks the last great event in relations between the dictatorial government and the Vatican. The embassy viewed this visit with considerable concern and saw his primary task of the year as in some way to “minimize the objective risks that the Pope’s visit to Chile represented.”⁵⁰ For the government and the embassy a prime risk was that the Pope might encourage the opposition and call for substantial changes by the government, as he had done in recent visits to Haiti and the Philippines where dictatorial regimes fell shortly after his visit. In light of these possibilities, Riesle warned his government that “with respect to the coming visit by the Pontiff to Chile [. . .] this Embassy has pointed in repeated communications to the Ministry to the many possible dangers, dangers that are all the more real given the fact of what happened in Haiti and the Philippines”.⁵¹ In all his letters the ambassador shows himself to be deeply concerned about the visit and warns the regime at length about the many risks it entails.⁵²

These concerns turn into a clear sense of triumph following the visit when Riesle recounts the post visit impressions of Chile among Vatican personnel and the Pope himself. According to the ambassador, the Pope was not impressed by the press campaign critical of Chile and maintained his distinct pastoral style and focus. For Riesle, this attitude by the Pope “confirms the wisdom of the course of action proposed by the embassy, which was based on confidence in the Holy Father’s sense of justice and paternal love. In sum, the government managed a dangerous situation and emerged stronger at home and with good, even strengthened relations with the Holy See”.⁵³ Statements of this kind by Riesle must of course be taken with a grain of salt. They respond to the ambassador’s own desire to highlight his role. Still, despite some exaggeration (and the fact that both sides, government and opposition tried to interpret the Pope’s visit to their favor ([Elgueta Rosas et al. 2019](#))), Riesle’s letters on the Pope’s visit to Chile allow us to affirm that the event was in no case a basic factor in the destabilization of the regime and the democratization of Chile.⁵⁴ The Pontiff had indeed a positive effect, as contemporary commentators stated, on the political opposition, including the Communist Party, and meant a possibility for the people to feel the force of mobilization ([Ruiz-Tagle 1987](#)). So, for the political opposition, it is not exaggerated to speak about a “democratizing effect” as long as the visit reinforced the unity of the political parties against the dictatorship, a work which had been catalyzed by Cardinal Fresno and his efforts for the National Accord. At the same time, the analysis here shows the importance of also taking into account the point of view of the government, which interpreted the Pope’s visit as a triumph of its own and made no change at all to its plans for political transition to

⁴⁹ Letter ESS to MREx: Remitir apreciación mensual, secret, 12 December 1985, en: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1985.

⁵⁰ Letter ESS to MREx: Remitir fotocopias . . . , 16 December 1986, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1986.

⁵¹ Letter ESS to MREx: Remite apreciación . . . , reservado, 6 March 1986, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1986.

⁵² These risks included a possible meeting between the Pope and Carmen Gloria Quintana, a young women who had been badly burned by security forces, the Pope’s speech in the National Stadium, and also the possibility that the Pope might spend some hours in the Italian embassy where, at the start of the dictatorship, agents of DINA had thrown the body of Lumi Videla, an early human rights victim. Riesle feared that the Pope’s visit to the embassy would revive memories of that “incident”, Letter ESS to MREx: Sugerir tomar conocimiento . . . , 27 November 1986, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1986.

⁵³ Letter ESS to MREx: Remitir Apreciación . . . , secret, 29 April 1987, in: Amrech, Acta Santa Sede, 1987.

⁵⁴ This analysis is close to the interpretation given by Jorge Hourton in his memoirs. Hourton believed that the Pope’s visit had not changed things much for the government ([Hourton 2009](#), p. 437). Together they help provide nuance to the impressions of Cardinal Silva Henríquez who did believe that the change of climate in the country was due to the visit by the Pope ([Cavallo 1991](#), p. 265).

democracy as laid out in the Constitution of 1980. The point to stress here is that we are looking at a complex and multi layered process that requires effort in order to understand the evolving views of *both sides*.⁵⁵ The stance taken by the Church in the fact of dictatorship and violence is not determined by local or national events or personalities alone. Attention to the international relations between the Chilean dictatorship and the Vatican sheds important additional light on any effort to evaluate judgments about the Church and to understand the evolution of its relations with the Chilean state.

5. Conclusions

To hold on to its claimed status as a legitimate government that defended “western Christian values”, the Pinochet regime needed to avoid a complete break with the Church. Since the Chilean hierarchy opposed the regime on the central issue of human rights, the dictatorship had recourse to all the powers of the State to secure a more favorable stance by the Church. These included intensive use of diplomatic channels,⁵⁶ working with its embassy to the Vatican, to reach an understanding with the superiors of the Chilean bishops. This effort to shape the composition and the state of opinion in the Chilean Church has not been taken into account much in the historiography of the period. This is why we think that our contribution here substantially advances the discussion.

Any reflection on understanding the actions taken by the government in its relations with the Vatican requires us to appreciate in detail how the military saw the Church. For the generals, those Catholics with progressive positions, including stances associated with the theology of liberation or the option for the poor, were above all enemies infiltrated and tainted by communism. In the eyes of the military, they were more communist than Catholic, and their denunciation of human rights violations were aimed primarily at damaging the government at home and before the international community. This explains the regime’s strategy of frontal attacks on certain clergy and bishops along with efforts to bring accusations about them before Vatican personnel including the Pope. The goal was to divide the Church, to moderate the influence of those critical of the regime and to build up the status of more friendly bishops.

There are several clear stages in this process, visible in the content and tone of letters from the Chilean embassy to the Vatican. In the first years of the dictatorship the effort was to soften opinion in Rome that was critical of the Chilean military. The hope was to secure broader influence within the Church. As the government became aware of continued defense of human rights in the Church, starting in 1976, there were escalating attacks on certain bishops including Cardinal Silva Henríquez who all formed part of a clear list of enemies. This tactic yielded few results given the positive reputation the Cardinal enjoyed in the Vatican. The regime continued to insist with its attacks and denunciations until 1978 with the accession of Pope John Paul II, who was seen as much more conservative than his immediate predecessors. So, the regime continued and intensified its campaign, laying the groundwork for influencing the naming of future bishops. This strategy proved relatively successful which also explains the post dictatorship evolution of the hierarchy to more centrist and conservative positions (above all in moral issues) (Elgueta Rosas et al. 2019). In retrospect, it is also clear that the persistent efforts of Chilean diplomacy with the Holy See helped moderate more open “democratizing” effects of the Pope’s 1987 visit to the country.

⁵⁵ This also makes it possible to modify judgments in a recent publication on the Pope’s visit, which still argues for a “strong positive impact on the return to democracy” in the country (Navasal Kunstmann 2017, p. 423). The author herself mentions the photo of Pinochet together with the Pope on the balcony of the Moneda [the Presidential palace] as having a strong legitimating effect on the dictatorship. (Pinochet tricked the Pope into appearing with him on the balcony) (Ibid., p. 402). Moreover, the fact that transition itself was carried out according to design set in place by the dictatorship itself (which provided for the 1988 plebiscite) and that this plan did not change at all following the papal visit, argues strongly against the idea of this visit as a powerful democratizing event.

⁵⁶ This obviously also includes the aggressive use of violence in effort to repress clergy, lay Catholics and bishops identified with the opposition.

The preceding notwithstanding, it is also important not to overestimate the dictatorship's influence over the Holy See. As the ambassador's letters and reports demonstrate, it is more likely that there was an over-estimation of their own role by both sides of the conflict, as each side retained substantial autonomy and independent agency. With its attacks on the press, its harassment of clergy and sisters and its regular denunciations to the Vatican, the government of Pinochet hoped to secure for itself a more submissive and controllable Church which, with Vatican supervision, would soften its criticisms of the regime, above all in the area of human rights. This did not happen. On the contrary, it is clear that the very fact of sustained official attacks led the national Church to close ranks in self-defense. This explains the continuity in defense of human rights between Cardinal Silva Henríquez and Cardinal Fresno. Both reacted to government attacks by affirming the autonomy of the Church and insisting even more strongly on the issues of violence and the defense of human rights. This defense included continued development of humanitarian work and a more confrontational stance to the military. This confrontational stance was not just the result of already existing progressive tendencies (of which Cardinal Fresno was not a part) but can be seen rather as an institutional defense to attacks from the dictatorial government. So, the interactions between the Church and the military regime come to be an important factor when we try to understand the role of the Church in the Chilean dictatorship.

Now, there are also some interpretations that are closer to the Church, which may overestimate its real influence and autonomy vis a vis the dictatorship. The ambassador's letters clearly show that the Chilean government was able to get its point of view heard in Rome. Although they were unable to change positions on human rights, the regime achieved its goals with the selection of new bishops, avoiding the designation of progressives and pressing for more moderate and more conservative candidates. In this way, actions by the state also helped reshape the Church's future actions as the added weight of conservative opinion made itself felt not only in the rapprochement between Church and State during the 1980s but also in events like the papal visit, where the regime managed to moderate views on Chilean reality within the Vatican.

Taking these conclusions into account, it seems reasonable for future analysis of the relations between Church and authoritarian regimes to stress the agency and interpretation of individual actors, the importance of conjunctural factors and the complex ties between local, national and international elements. The position of the Church towards political violence does not only depend on long-term structural tendencies or on political affiliations, but also on conjunctural reactions to attacks of the state, on personal interpretations of the intentions of the other side and on a national and international game of action and re-action to influence the views respectively of the Church or of the state.

The goal of the present analysis is not to invalidate previous efforts at explaining the evolution of the Church's relations with the dictatorship, but rather to add an important element that has been downplayed or simply absent in much current historiography. Strong opposition to the dictatorship can also be explained as a reaction to government attacks. The changing role of the Church in the years after 1983 must also be attributed to the government's impact on the naming of new bishops. However, neither of these can be fully understood unless they are situated in the context of a richly detailed, dynamic, and multi layered relation between the Church and the government which takes into account the autonomous agency of both institutions. In this way, my goal here has been to throw new light on the ideas, actions and specific plans of the government in its dealings with the Church, and in this way at the same time to understand in richer terms the Church's own evolving role in the opposition to the systematic violence of Chile's military dictatorship.

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